

African American History Month: Honoring the Past, Securing the Future

Surface Warriors · History and Heritage · February 12, 2020February 19, 2020 · 2 Minutes

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The Surface Force joins the Navy in commemorating African American History Month by recognizing the valiant efforts of African Americans in the Navy. We honor our legacy and pay tribute to our Sailors who have undauntedly and courageously contributed to the defense of our Nation.

Our Navy would not be what it is today without the contributions of African Americans who have paved the way for us. This month, you will see names like [Doris Miller](https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/miller.html) (<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/miller.html>), [the Golden 13](https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-people/m/martin-graham-e.html) (<https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-people/m/martin-graham-e.html>), the Golden 14, and [Carl Brashear](https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/people/trailblazers/Carl-Brashear.html) (<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/people/trailblazers/Carl-Brashear.html>). These individuals changed history, and we continue to share their stories.

Our Surface Force has also seen incredible individuals whose patriotism, determination, and courage we continue to honor. Today’s Surface Warriors stand proudly thanks to the leadership lessons, integrity, and perseverance of our predecessors:

Chief Gunner’s Mate John Henry “Dick” Turpin

John Henry Turpin enlisted in the Navy in November 1896 and was a member of USS Maine’s (ACR 1) crew when she was destroyed by an explosion in February 1898. He survived that disaster and the boiler explosion on USS Bennington (PG 4) in July 1905, as well as served aboard other ships before leaving active duty in 1916. He was recalled to service in 1917, when the U.S. entered World War I. In June of that year, Turpin became chief gunner’s mate on USS Marblehead (CL 12), becoming one of the Navy’s first African American chief petty officers.

Vice Adm. Samuel Lee Gravely, Jr.

Samuel Lee Gravely, Jr. enlisted in the Navy Reserves in September 1942 and was trained as a fireman apprentice. A year later, he participated in V-12, a World War II college training program designed to meet an urgent need for wartime Navy and Marine Corps commissioned officers. In December 1944, Gravely successfully completed his midshipman training, becoming the first African American commissioned as an officer from the Navy Reserve Officer Training Course. After two years of service, Gravely was released from active duty in April 1946, then was recalled in 1949 to be a Navy recruiter, following President Truman’s executive order to desegregate the Armed Services. Gravely’s naval career came with many firsts: he was the first African American to command a U.S. Navy warship – USS Theodore E. Chandler (DD 717); the first African American to command an American warship under combat conditions since the Civil War – USS Taussig (DD 746); the first African American to command a major naval warship – USS Jouett (CG 29); the first African American admiral; the first African American to rise to the rank of vice admiral; and the first African American to command a U.S. Fleet – Commander, 3rd Fleet.

Adm. Joseph Paul Reason

Joseph Paul Reason reported to the U.S. Naval Academy as a Midshipman in June 1961 and was commissioned in June 1965. After his first sea tour, Reason shipped off to the Naval Nuclear Power School, becoming a Nuclear Surface Warfare Officer. As a lieutenant commander, he served as naval aide to U.S. President Jimmy Carter from December 1976 to June 1979. In 1996, Reason became the first African American officer in the United States Navy to become a four-star admiral when he took command of the Atlantic Fleet. From 1996 to 1999, he led more than 120,000 personnel, 190 ships and 1,300 aircraft at 17 naval bases.

It’s important to acknowledge the achievements of our past Sailors and recognize the obstacles they faced to help shape the Surface Force we know today. During African American History Month, we pay tribute to trailblazers who forever changed the history of the United States Navy and charted a course for today’s fleet to follow as we secure our future.



